

5. Revelation: Smyrna – The Persecuted Church

Text: Revelation 2:8-11

Ps. Johnny Lesnik

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Introduction:

We continue this study through the letters Jesus is sending to seven different churches in the book of Revelation. Reminder of the key verse to understanding this book: **Rev 1:9**.

Today we come to the shortest of all the letters given to the churches in chapter 2... the letter to Smyrna – the persecuted church. **Read 2:8-11.**

I hope that as we study these seven letters to the seven churches that you are able to see the pattern Jesus uses as He writes to each of these churches. He first identifies Himself... in this letter He says in **verse 8, "I am the First and the Last, the one who died and came to life again."** By the way, if you really want a beautiful picture of Jesus, look in all seven of these letters and watch how Jesus identifies Himself. Then the pattern continues and Jesus always points out the good things in the church. If there is something good, He points it out. Then if there is something that needs correcting in the church, He points that out as well. Then He tells them what to do about it. You will notice here however that Smyrna has no criticism. He then says, **"He who has ears to hear, let him hear"**, and then He ends the letter by making a promise. That's the pattern repeated seven times.

I. THE AUTHOR OF THE LETTER

As we begin this letter, I want to remind you firstly who the Author of the letter is. This is not the apostle John writing. This is Jesus Christ Himself writing to the members of this church... to these Christians. But I want you to notice what He says about Himself, **"These are the words of Him who is the First and the Last..."** In chapter 1 He also says that He is the **"Alpha and the Omega."** In other words, He is everything. For the Christian who feels like they have nothing, with Jesus they have everything! Then He talks about His omnipotence, **"who died and came to life again."** Think about that for a moment... I want you to think about every other religious leader who has ever lived. No other religious leader can make that claim. Buddha, who was a man, died and he did not come back to life again. He can't say that. Mohammed died but He cannot say, **"I died and came back to life again."** David Koresh, who claimed to be the Messiah from the book of Revelation, also died has not come back to life. In fact, no other religious teacher has been able to say what Jesus Christ says here. He is saying, **"I have power over death."** There are a lot of people who have lived and a lot of people who have died but there has only been One who can say, **"I lived, and I died, and now I live again."** So Jesus is omnipotent.

But He also is omniscient... He is all-knowing. Look what He says, **"I know your works and your tribulation, and your poverty. I know what you are going through."** Listen, for these believers in Smyrna who were facing martyrdom this was exactly what they needed to hear and it was exactly those attributes of God that they needed reminding of in order to be strengthened in the face of their pressure and suffering. I wonder if that's what you need to hear today? I wonder if you need to be reminded of Christ's omnipotence and omniscience? You might be thinking, **"How am I going to get out of this situation? There's no hope for this problem."** Let me tell you that the Lord knows what you're going through, He understands, and He will be your strength to help you stand. He will not fail you, He has never failed anyone who has trusted in Him in the history of mankind, and let me tell you something – Christian – whether you live or whether you die, if your hope and trust is in Jesus Christ, you cannot lose! Fix your eyes on Him... one glimpse of Him in glory will make all the troubles of life worth the Christian life.

II. THE AFFLICTION OF THE BELIEVERS

This church was going through a terrible time. Let me tell you a little bit about Smyrna... this city was the centre of emperor worship for the Roman Empire. The Roman Empire wanted to bring unity to the entire empire so they came up with the idea of one united religion that everyone had to participate in... and that was to worship the Emperor as God on earth. This is how they did it: Every year every person who lived in the Roman Empire was required by Roman law to make a gift, pay an amount of money to burn incense and they were required to say was "Kaiser Kurios" which means "Caesar is Lord." Now, the church of Smyrna was just a small struggling church in the midst of a culture that had many gods, Jupiter, Zeus, Mercury, Mars, etc... and the Romans were happy to add Jesus to the list and put Him up on a shelf with the Pantheon of all their other gods. But the problem was that the Christians refused to name any other God than Jesus Christ, and so they were labelled as 'atheists', and many of them were put to death! These are some afflictions they faced:

1. They faced pressure: Jesus says, *"I know your tribulation. I know what you are going through."* They were experiencing pressure from the outside. This is not talking about the great Tribulation that is going to come on the earth. This is referring to troubles, difficulties, and afflictions. It's the word Jesus used when he said, *"In this world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer I have overcome the world."* (John 16:33) These Christians were facing all these pressures from the outside because people were persecuting them all because they would not say, "Caesar is Lord." Now, perhaps you know some people who say, *"I guess this migraine headache that I have is just the cross I have to bear"*, or *"this ingrown toenail I have is just the cross I have to bear"*... they think that's what it means to bear a cross. But when Jesus said, *"Take up your cross and follow me"* (Mat. 16:24)... He wasn't talking about an ingrown toenail or a migraine headache; He was talking about dying because anytime you saw somebody bearing a cross in the streets of Rome, they were getting ready to die.

Now, yes, I know that it can mean dying to self, and selfish desires, and crucifying your sinful nature and its sinful passions but let me be very clear... for the Christians in this city of Smyrna it was meant very literally because many of these people were losing their lives for the sake of Christ. So the pressure they were experiencing was so much more than just a headache, or a missed opportunity for a job promotion, or an electricity bill that's a bit high, or someone scratching your car... these Christians' very lives were on the line and all because they would not say, "Caesar is Lord" Now that's pressure. Could you imagine if our Prime Minister Anthony Albanese required every Australian to call him a god or else you could be killed? "Anthony the Almighty..." 😊 Seriously though, have you noticed that pressure usually builds stronger Christians? Church, we do not understand and we cannot comprehend the freedom we have in Australia to worship the true God of heaven. If you have not thanked God today for the freedom you have—you should, because we are relatively free from that kind of governmental pressure Jesus is talking about here.

2. They faced poverty—but Jesus called them "rich": This was a very poor church. He says in *verse 9, "I know your tribulation and I know your poverty."* Look at this word – poverty. There are two Greek words for poverty, the first speaks of having no surplus - in other words, you've got enough to get through but no more. That's not the word that is used here! It's the other word that means 'destitute', absolutely nothing, dirt poor! But Jesus calls them 'rich', even though they didn't have much in the way of finances.

You see, what you need to understand is that they struggled financially because most workers in Asia Minor at that time had to belong to a labour guild which is much like a trade union today. But in order to belong to a labour guild, you had to burn incense and bow before the god of that labour guild. But if you were a Christian you couldn't do that because a true Christian will not bow their knee to anybody but Jesus Christ.

So, if you were a Christian you either couldn't get employment or your employer would get rid of you very quickly because you were viewed as traitors against the Emperor. If someone didn't like you as a Christian, it was easy to get a mob roused up, go to your Christian home and smash it up, and even confiscate your possessions in the name of Caesar and the Empire. And there were no insurance policies! As a Christian of Smyrna, you would be living in one of the wealthiest cities in Asia Minor and yet, as a Christian, you yourself would be destitute – destitute!

Illustration: Tertullian of Carthage was the pastor of a church in the Roman province of Africa around the year 200 A.D. Some of the members of his congregation came to him and argued, "Tertullian, we must burn incense to this pagan god even though we are Christians. We just have to do it. We won't mean it, but we will do it." Tertullian said, "Why?" They said, "Because we have to work!" Tertullian said, "Why do you have to work?" They said, "Because we have to eat." He said, "Why do you have to eat?" They said, "Because we have to live." Tertullian the pastor looked at them and said, "No, you don't have to work, you don't have to eat, and you don't have to live. The only thing you have to do is be faithful to God." There's enough truth in what he said to carry you through anything.

Oh, it really meant something to be a Christian there because you had to stand up and be counted. The struggles, the suffering, and the poverty that these early Christians faced... you'd really be thinking whether it was worth it. I heard a preacher on one of these Christian TV channels shout out that it pays to serve Jesus... and then he went on talking about sowing financially into his ministry and receiving back a hundredfold because it pays to serve Jesus. Well, let me just tell you that it doesn't pay financially.

Ask Simon Peter what it pays to serve Jesus. Simon Peter left what we would call a very successful fishing business. It was not some little cheap two-bit outfit and he followed Jesus. What did it end up doing in his life? Did he end up with a huge successful ministry with a glorious church building that had all the programs one could wish for? And did he end up owning his own jet liner, have a dedicated TV program, authored 15 bestselling books, only stay at expensive hotels when out and about preaching, and wear only Gucci business suits, and wear enough golden rings to look like someone from the Mafia... and all because it pays to serve Jesus?? No... let me show you how much it paid Peter... the time came when men crucified Simon Peter upside down because he didn't feel worthy to be crucified like Jesus. What did it pay for Stephen? It ended up with Stephen kneeling before the Sanhedrin there having the life stoned out of him. What did it pay to the James, the step-brother of Jesus? They took him to the pinnacle of the Temple and told him to speak against Jesus, but when he wouldn't but rather preached Christ, they tossed him off the pinnacle of the Temple and when he fell to the ground below it didn't kill him. Somebody came along with a club and they were ordered to beat him to death! That what it paid James. I saw a sticker that says, *"Working for the Lord doesn't pay much, but His retirement plan is out of this world!"* That is so true.

I want you to know something about the church at Smyrna. They were poor financially and in the eyes of this world... but look what Jesus said about them. *"You're poor, but I want to tell you, you guys are rich. You are rich! You are wealthy!"* Look in **3:17**. The Laodicean church was just the opposite. Jesus says, *"You folks say, 'I'm rich; I have acquired wealth and I don't need a thing.'" They thought they were rich, but what did Jesus say about them? "You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked."* Compare for just a moment these two churches. Can I ask you a very searching question: have you got the values of Christ or the values of this world? Do I need to repeat that? Have you got the values of Christ or the values of this world? Do you value material things over spiritual? The Biblical teaching regarding suffering is not popular, but that is what enriches the Christian's life and testimony! That is why, often, the godliest of men and women have suffered the most.

Can I remind you of a verse that you know well, *2 Corinthians 8:9: 'For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich',* that's the same word that is used here of Smyrna, *'yet for your sakes he became poor',* that is the same word for destitute used of Smyrna, *'that ye through his poverty and destitution might be spiritually rich'.* Folks, whether you like to hear it or not, this is the way the Master went. It was the way He came into this world - Joseph and Mary, heavy with child, came to the inn, and they were refused entrance. He was born in a stable. Then later when Mary comes to bring the offering to the Temple, she brings a working man's offering. The Lord Jesus for 30 years adorns the apron of a carpenter in His father's shop. When He begins His ministry, He borrows a boat in which to preach, He has to ask a man for a penny to illustrate what to render to Caesar and to God. The moment He died, He left nothing behind Him, even His clothes were gambled for by the soldiers. After the crucifixion, His corpse had to be placed in another man's tomb! Yet being destitute, He possessed everything! He holds the world in His hand!

Church, is that how we are? Oh yes, we ought to be thankful for what we have here in the West, but you know what our problem is? I think all of us have got too rich. All of us, myself included, would probably be a lot better off, a lot stronger in faith, more steadfast in our walk, more diligent in our pursuit of holiness... if we had a lot less. You see, churches are often judged today on how much money they have, and how much programs they have to offer, and how much music they're producing, and how big their Easter and Christmas productions are.... But that's not how Christ judged this church: they were destitute, they had nothing and yet they were rich! Christ had the highest of praise for this church.

3. They faced persecution: So, they faced pressure, they faced poverty, and they faced persecution. Jesus said, *"Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer."* Now, let's get something straight here... the life of a Christian is not a life free of suffering. If you are a Christian, you will suffer. This heretical modern health, wealth and prosperity gospel that you hear preached on our TV and social media platforms is honestly from the pit of Hell! It is not true to the word of God. Here in Smyrna, I've a feeling that these Christians may have said, "Hang on a minute. We've endured a lot so far but we are going to suffer more? No more, Lord! Is it not enough, Lord?" Do you ever feel like that? And look, there's no talk of deliverance here, no talk of the miraculous – though God can do it, it's not mentioned here. And Christ tells them, *'You're going to have to go through more. You might be destitute, but there's more to come!'* Frightening, isn't it? But notice there isn't any complaining among them. I know I'd be complaining, wouldn't you. 😊

But Jesus counsels them first to be fearless, *"do not fear"*. We fear many things, don't we? In fact, our whole culture is a culture of fear. Don't believe me? Look how many different types of insurance commercials are on TV. We're afraid that our car might get scratched... so we take out damage insurance. We're afraid that our car might get stolen... so we take out theft insurance. We're afraid that our car might get set on fire... so we take out fire insurance. We're afraid for our animals, so we take out pet insurance! Yes, I know, we justify it as being smart and wise to do so, but folks, we need a reality check as we study this passage of Scripture today: these Christians were facing prison, they were facing death, and the Lord said to them literally, *'Stop being afraid!'* What He was saying to these believers was simply: you may be robbed of your wealth, you may be robbed of your health, you may even be robbed of your very life - but no-one can rob you of your eternal riches!

Illustration: *The pastor of the church at Smyrna, was a man named Polycarp (a disciple of John). This old, respected, loved pastor was arrested under one of the periods of Roman persecution and was commanded to declare in a public place that "Caesar is Lord." This is what he said, "Eighty and six years have I served Him and He (that is Jesus) never did me harm. How then can I blaspheme my King and my Saviour?" The Roman Proconsul said, "If you will not confess Caesar as Lord, I will burn you in the fire." Polycarp replied, "You threaten me with fire which burns for an hour and after a little is extinguished, but you are ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment and of eternal punishment reserved for the ungodly. Why are you waiting? Bring forth what you will." They tied him to a stake and Jews in Smyrna (that might have been why Jesus talks about those Jews who are of the synagogue of Satan) gathered the wood on a Sabbath day which was against their Jewish law but they gathered the wood and lit the fire around this old pastor. As he was dying, Polycarp prayed these words, "I thank Thee that Thou hast graciously thought me worthy of this day and of this hour that I may receive a portion in the number of Thy martyrs in the cup of Thy Christ" and he died.*

This is just one account of the thousands and thousands of Christians who suffered persecution. The Roman Emperor, Nero, filled his jails in Rome with Christians. Then he had them brought out and tied to the trees in his garden, then covered in tar and pitch and set on fire as human torches to illuminate his garden as he rode his horses through his gardens at night. People laugh about the Christians verses the lions, but it was no laughing matter to those Christians! There are many, many accounts of Christians kneeling in an arena as a wild bull or a wild animal tore them apart as they called upon Jesus asking Jesus to forgive their persecutors. There are actual accounts of Roman soldiers who witnessed how these Christians died. They threw down their swords and they threw down their spears and these Roman soldiers became Christians on the spot because of how these Christians died. Then they were immediately were put to death because they named the name of Jesus. Jesus said, *"Blessed are you when men persecute you and say all manner of evil against you for my name's sake."* He said, *"Because that's the way they persecuted the prophets."* (Matt 5:11-12)

What is the 10 days about? Is it an actual 10 days then it's all over. Well, 10 days seems to refer to a set period of time that they would be thrown into prison, would be tested and tried, and would need to be faithful unto death. It is interesting to note that according to the history books for around 200 years, there were 10 separate attempts by 10 separate Roman emperors to exterminate and eradicate Christianity from the Roman empire. The last attempt was by emperor Diocletian, and that lasted 10 years! Christians were martyred, butchered, burned, cut, bruised, wounded, and crushed for Jesus Christ under the iron heel of the pagan Romans... but from that period of tribulation there would be a lasting aroma, a fragrant smell that would ascend unto God that had never gone up before. Christians are never as Christ-like as when they go through suffering.

Let's not miss that... and please remember that Christ is called the Man of Sorrows, the Suffering Servant of Jehovah in Isaiah 53. Do you remember when Christ was born, the wise men presented Him with Gold, frankincense, and myrrh? Myrrh is always associated with suffering. And how much our Lord Jesus suffered in His earthly life. Upon the cross He hung dying for men's sins, and they reached up with a sponge on a spear and tried to give Him wine mingled with myrrh to dull the pain. Then when He died and was buried, Nicodemus bought an ointment of myrrh to prepare His body for the tomb. What suffering Jesus experienced from birth, to the cross, to the tomb itself. But I want you to see something... Isaiah goes on to speak prophetically in **chapter 60:6** of when our Lord will come again. It tells us that He will be presented at that time with Gold, and with frankincense... but there is something missing! The myrrh isn't there. Because when He comes back, He will not be coming as the Suffering Servant of Jehovah, He will be coming as the Sovereign King of Kings and the Lord of Lords to judge, to reign, and to rule!

CHRIST'S PROMISE: THE VICTOR'S CROWN

Jesus promised the crown of life: Jesus promises to reward faithfulness with a crown of life. James 1:12 speaks of the same crown: *'Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love Him.'* The Bible has a lot to say about the different types of crowns that God will give us. The word for crown here is "stephanos", which is the laurel wreath and athlete would receive when the judge would say, "You have finished the race. You have run a good race and now here is your prize. Here is your crown." And that crown is eternal life. But don't get too comfortable with that crown because in chapters 4 and 5, the Bible says that when Jesus raptures the church and we get to heaven, we're going to kneel before the Lamb on the throne and the Bible says we're going to cast our crowns at His feet and we're going to say, *"Crown Him with many crowns because He is the only one worthy of praise and adoration."* Church, the day is coming when the Lord will say to His faithful servants, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

Jesus promised deliverance from the second death: The first death is physical death. That's inevitable if the Lord tarries if He doesn't come back to rapture the church... soon you may die physically. That's the first death. That's inevitable. But what is the second death? The second death in **Revelation 20:11-15**. So this second death and it is what we might call "eternal death" because the Bible says every person who has not been born again is going to be cast into the lake of fire. It is the second death. When you trust Jesus Christ as your personal Saviour, when you are born again your name is written in the Lamb's Book of Life. Jesus says, *"You be faithful. You trust Me and you don't even have to worry about the second death!"* Have you noticed people today are afraid of that first death? People do everything they can to deny the fact that death is coming. They always try to not even think about *"I'm going to die one day!"* They do everything they can to put it off, and put it off, and put it off and *"We don't even want to talk about it!"* I wish that we were just as afraid of the second death as we are the first death. Jesus said, ***"And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell."*** (Mat. 10:28)

Now, some of these Smyrna Christians would have died through torture, or maybe the rack, or perhaps to be burned, or maybe fed to the lions. Let me ask you this sobering question: if you were in this church, would you overcome? Let me remind you that John tells us that those that overcome the world are the ones who are born of God, and that it's our faith that gives us that victory (**1 John 5:4-5**)... but if that was you, would you take the name of Christ? Do you realise that as a believer-overcomer, you might have to face death, and pass through death, and a gruesome death at that... but you will never have to go through the second death!

Friends, have you heard what the Holy Spirit is saying to these churches today? What He is saying to you? The cost of discipleship is so much more than just going down an aisle and repeating a sinner's prayer. Are you believing? Are you saved? Are you born again? Are you living for Him? Are you serving Him faithfully?

LET'S PRAY....